

Special Topics In Art: Portrait and Figure Painting

Course Information

Title: Portrait and Figure Painting

Section: ART 3307

Location: Fox Fine Arts, Room A455

Time: M/W 7:30-10:20 pm

Instructor Contact Information

Name: Tom Birkner

Office Hours: T/TH 5-6 pm and by appointment

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Phone: 747-7839 (office), 917-902-2059 (mobile)

Instructor's Introduction

Tom Birkner, B.A. Rutgers University, M.F.A. The Pennsylvania State University, is an Assistant Professor of Art and a member of the Department of Art faculty for two years. Joining UTEP from the San Francisco Bay Area and a long-time resident of New York City, Tom previously taught at Drew University, Madison, NJ and at Parsons The New School for Design in NY and Paris. He has been painting and exhibiting both nationally and internationally for 25 years.

Course Description:

Portrait and Figure Painting is an important Special Topics course because all art is figurative. Whether displayed in an image, written about in books, interpreted in music, or implied in the design of architecture, all art has a figurative perspective because, simply put, all art is made by and for us.

With this perspective in mind, *Portrait and Figure Painting* will be an intensive study into depicting faces and the figure in paint. Fundamentals of drawing, proportion, anatomy, color and figurative space will be covered extensively. These fundamentals will be a focus of this course for one primary reason: **so that you gain the freedom to paint the figure in whatever way you choose.** You will learn from your own experience, and from your peers next to you, how the complexities of figurative representation appear within with the subtle differences that everyone inevitably presents on canvas. Through the recognition of these differences, and with practice, the intention here is for you to paint the figure well and to understand some of the philosophical ramifications of what that means.

Painting from direct observation will be the primary method of working. We will paint from primarily from live models, though forays into mediated representation will also be covered. An equal amount of time will be spent between painting the nude figure and painting particular people and their inherent character. There will be times when we focus on speed and finishing a painted study in one sitting. Other

projects will be engaged with the steps of painting through multiple stages over an extended period of time. Demonstrations and image presentations will be given weekly. There will be as much structure as possible, while leaving room for improvisation so any topic, approach, question or suggestion that makes this a better course gets attention.

Painting the figure is at once remarkably simple and infinitely complex. During the next fifteen weeks, we will embark upon a course that almost everyone engaged in visual art has also taken – we are going to start the humble and humbling process of making images of other people, so we can see who we, as a people, are.

Course Goals:

- To paint the face and figure with skill and confidence.
- To begin a focused study of representational approaches to the figure.
- To learn the importance and limits of the figure as a conveyor of meaning and formal exploration.
- To understand the ways painting has represented the figure through history.
- To combine your experience in life and painting so far to make figurative paintings that are exciting, smart and appropriate to our time.

Weekly Course Outline:

Week 1a - Pre-Start - Choosing Sizes and Surfaces

**Choosing Grounds: White, Neutral, Color
Layout and Initial Composition**

1b - Sculpting 3D Elements of the Face In Clay

1c - Starting Out: Drawing Carefully vs. Full On Painting

Week 2 - Developing A Painting In Progress

Week 3 – Facial, Skeletal and Muscular Structure

Week 4a - Seeing and Manipulating Form and Shadow

4b - Nuance and Subtlety In The Figure And Face

Week 5 - Colors of Flesh Tones and Shadows/ Creating The Illusion of Light

Week 6 – Flat/Volumetric Form

Week 7 - Artificial Color & Lighting

Week 8 - The Painted Surface: Paint As A Physical Metaphor

Week 9 – The Figure In Space/Backgrounds and Backdrops

Week 10 - Stillness and Motion/Figurative Action/Choosing A Pose

Week 11 – Representing Presence or Presenting An Idea? The figure as a symbol of meaning.

Week 12 – Figuration in the Digital Age – Reality and Virtual Reality

Week 13 - Turning Experience Into A Vision

Week 14 - Making It Great

Please note: This is a weekly outline. There will be more detailed writings given each week, which will more fully describe what is outlined above.

Also included with the weekly handouts will be the weekly homework, which will be an essential part of this class. All paintings done as homework will be hung the following Monday on the studio walls of A455.

Course Requirements and Assignments:

A minimum total of twelve paintings will be due at semester's end. Here is an example of the quantity and scale of what is expected by semester's end.

Six small-scale portraits (up to 16" in width or height)

Two moderate portraits or figure studies (up to 24" in width or height)

Two mid-sized paintings (up to 40" in width or height)

Two large-scale paintings (above 40" wide or height)

Class Critiques

Critiques will occur every 5th or 6th class. This format will replace the traditional mid-term/final critique approach. This change is being made to help with time and deadline management. More frequent but shorter critiques will establish a clearer semester regimen and give you additional input from your fellow painters.

You are expected to have at least one new painting for each critique. Paintings in these critiques must show enough progress to be gradable because all work will be informally graded - "informally" because you are encouraged to work on your paintings throughout the semester. No grade will be final until the semester's end.

Grading Standards

Grading will be based on cumulative effort, improvement and quality. Number grades will be given to core projects. This helps you know where you are. The number breakdown: **100-95 = A, 94-87 = B, 86-76 = C, 75-70 = D, 69 or lower = F.**

Tentative grades will be given at mid-term. Final grades will be determined by an averaging of project grades. Because skill levels vary, evaluation will be influenced by improvement on an individual basis. A basic outline of grading priorities is as follows:

6 project-based paintings	30%
5 individually- directed paintings	30%
1 large-scale final painting	20%
Image Library and preparatory work	20%
Effort/Participation/Improvement	10%
Total	110%

Effort might only count for 10% in the outline above, but actually it counts for everything. Everything you get out of this class will be determined by what you put into it. Your effort means a lot not only because it shows you are trying, but also because the more you work the better you will get at painting. As Confucius said, “One cannot expect rewards until the difficult parts are mastered.”

Grading Guidelines

F - Failing grades are given for required work that is not submitted and for incomplete final projects. Make-up work or completion of projects after missed due dates may be permitted only with the approval of the instructor.

D - Projects loosely adhere to the class learning outcomes and the minimum terms of assignments. Work receiving a “D” grade displays a clear lack of effort. These kinds of projects will also put forward obviously minimal efforts in exploring ideas and visual possibilities.

C - These are average projects. They will demonstrate some success in engaging with the assigned material or subject. The project will show that the student can identify and work with key concepts and has a nominal grasp of class instruction and basic painting principles. Projects will display some effort in the area of critical thinking through attempts at developing the final image. Typical of a C project, however, is the project not succeeding in pushing beyond average notions of effort and visual acuity.

B - These are very good projects. The B project does everything a C project does, but offers a completed image that is visually interesting and displays clear effort. What also distinguishes a B project is the student’s ability to offer a unique insight and ask questions of themselves. There will be several possibilities explored in preparatory studies that lead to a final outcome. These projects are well-executed, creative versions of the class assignment.

A - These are exceptionally good projects that go above and beyond the expectations and requirements set forth in the requirements. They demonstrate substantial effort and achievement in the areas of critical thinking and art making. They also demonstrate considerable technical skill, originality and present something vital to the viewer. In short, the A project is art.

Course Policies

Attendance, punctuality, participation and appropriate class conduct are considered performance criteria for this class. Failure to perform to required standards will result in strong grade penalties and can cause failure of this course.

Attendance Policy:

- Each student is permitted 3 absences during the semester without penalty. Students with more than 3 absences should consider dropping this course and retaking it at a time when the student can commit the proper attention to the course.
- Each unexcused absence after 3 will result in the final course grade being lowered by 1 full letter grade. Absences after the first 3 can be excused only if the first 3 absences are excused.
- Excused absences are defined as documented illness or serious illness or death in the immediate family.
- Coming to class late or leaving early is regarded and graded as being absent. All students are required to attend class on time and to remain in the class the entire time. Entering class late and leaving early is disruptive to the learning environment.
- Coming to class unprepared or attending class and not working is regarded as absent.
- Information missed during an absence is the sole responsibility of the student.

Course Participation:

- Participation in all discussions, critiques and class days is required for this course.
- Development and execution of class projects must be done utilizing all class meetings.
- Projects executed solely out of class will not be accepted.
- Participation in the collaborative group environment of the studio is essential to the successful completion of this course.

Class Conduct:

All interactions with the models must be courteous and respectful. There will also be no visitors. No one not registered for the class is allowed in the studios while the model is posing. Entering and exiting the studio must be limited to when the model is not posing.

There will be zero tolerance for any conduct that strays from these basic rules.

- Sick Policy

If you are not feeling well, or if you are sick, then you should not come to this class under any circumstances. You should instead seek medical care, and/or recuperate at home. Email me or call me when you are able and let me know the circumstances, and I will help you to catch up in class when you are feeling better. . If you are pregnant, or have other physical issues such as allergies to dust, respiratory issues, anything that I should be aware of, please inform me of this immediately, and we will work to make you safe and comfortable. If a family member is ill, and you need to care for that person, please email me or call and let me know what your situation is.

- Guests

Guests are not permitted at any time during class. Please tell your friends, family members, partners, that they may see you before or after class time. You are expected to remain in class at all times, and may not step-out to visit with guests during class. You will be held responsible for adhering to this policy, and I will give you one warning. After that, I will ask you to leave class and you will be counted absent for that class period.

- Cell phones and tablets

Please turn off your phones during class time. No texting. You will be asked to leave if your phone goes off during class, and be counted absent for that class period.

- Music

Ear phones are permitted, but not during class discussion. Music systems in the form of a boom box are not permitted in class. Anyone listening to Justin Bieber will be considered absent.

- Monitored Studio Hours

The studios will be open for your general use during posted monitored hours. A schedule will be posted during the first week of class.

The UTEP police will have your name and student ID number, and if the studio is closed, you may call them up and they will come over to the studio and let you into the building/class rooms. The UTEP police number is 747-5611.

- Studio Safety

Some aspects of painting can be hazardous if proper precautions are not taken. All safety procedures will be explained to you throughout the semester, and every consideration has been taken to create a safe environment for you to work in. If you are pregnant, or have other physical issues such as allergies to dust, respiratory issues, anything that I should be aware of, please inform me of this immediately, and we will work to make you safe and comfortable.

- Cleanliness

You are required to clean up your work area when you are finished working in the studio. Please put all of your tools, materials, etc. away in your lockers, and wipe down tables,

easels and sinks. Do not leave paint or mineral spirits on the floor. **Close all jars containing mineral spirits and put them in the flame retardant cabinet in Studio A457. Put all rags with solvent on them on the red, flame retardant trash cans with lids.** If you have difficulty cleaning up after yourself, then you will receive a special tutorial on how to clean up after class.

- **Personal Safety**

For both spirit and safety, it is highly recommended that you come to the studios with others from your class. If you must work alone, late at night, please be sure to let someone know where you are, and please keep a cell phone with you. If you feel unsafe for any reason, you should call the UTEP police immediately (747-5611). There is a studio phone for your use. Additionally, if you would like an escort to your car at night, please call the UTEP Police department, and they should accommodate your needs. Please inform me if there is a problem, and I will address it immediately with the proper authorities.

- **Work Removal**

Finished works must be removed by the date set by the instructor of this course. All works left in the studio after this date will be disposed of. All materials, canvases, etc. will become the property of the studio after this date.

Late Assignments, Make-up Work and Exams

Late assignments, make-up work, and make-up exams are only afforded in the case of an excused absence by arrangement and approval of the instructor.

Incompletes, Withdrawals, Pass/Fail

- Incompletes or “I” grades will be considered for students completing satisfactory or better work and having serious legitimate situations beyond their control requiring additional time to complete the course requirements. All “I” grades are at the discretion of the instructor and the approval of the Department Chair.
- Students hold full responsibility for withdrawing from this course if that procedure is elected. Withdrawals must be completed on or before the final date to drop a course with a “W”. Students missing this deadline will be issued a grade for the performance in the course.
- ART 3307 is a grade-based course and is not available for audit or pass/fail options.

University Policy Statements

Cheating/Plagiarism: Cheating is unethical and not acceptable. Plagiarism is using information or original wording in a paper without giving credit to the source of that information or wording: it is also not acceptable. Do not submit work under your name that you did not do yourself. You may not submit work for this class that you did for another class. If you are found to be cheating or plagiarizing, you will be subject to disciplinary action, per UTEP catalog policy. Refer to <http://www.utep.edu/dos/acadintg.htm> for further information.

Disabilities: I will make any reasonable accommodations for students with limitations due to disabilities, including learning disabilities. Please see me personally before or after class in the first two weeks or make an appointment, to discuss any special needs you might have. If you have a documented disability and require specific accommodations, you will need to contact the Disabled Student Services Office in the East Union Bldg., Room 106 within the first two weeks of classes. The Disabled Student Services Office can also be reached in the following ways:

Web: <http://www.utep.edu/dsso>

Phone: 915-747-5148